

Crusade in Europe: A Critique of Eisenhower's Operational Art

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April 13, 1992

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 13 APR 1992		2. REPORT TYPE N/A		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Crusade in Europe: A Critique of Eisenhower's Operational Art				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National Defense University National War College Fort McNair Washington, DC 20319				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release, distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 18	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Crusade in Europe: A Critique of Eisenhower's Operational Art

It is ironic that the general who led the 4 million men under arms responsible for defeating the forces of Nazi Germany on the Western Front during World War II is not generally remembered for the quality of his generalship. Despite the significance of his victories he is rarely mentioned as being in the company of history's great captains. A statement made in a recent biography of Britain's Field Marshall Montgomery is characteristic: "Eisenhower was not a profound military thinker ... often unsubtle and contrary to some of the accepted canons of strategic thought ... [he] was certainly no Marlborough" (Chalfont 271). Like Sam Grant, Ike won the war but we are not sure he had much to do with it really. Luck, good subordinates, America's overwhelming material strength and the Russians would have eventually beaten the Nazis with or without Eisenhower --- or would they?

Those same military historians who denigrate Eisenhower's generalship and give him low marks as a "strategist" and "tactician" also usually praise his skills as a planner, staff officer, logistician and politician/diplomat. He is often described as a man who could integrate large and diverse military forces as well as able to meld very divergent personalities into a coherent fighting team. These traits have a familiar ring to them, they describe what in today's military are essential characteristics for senior level military operators. It would appear, on reflection, that these military historians have missed the forest for the trees in their assessment of Eisenhower. Eisenhower was, perhaps, the first American master of operational art for "machine age armies" (to borrow a phrase from John Wheldon).

The following remarks address themselves to a critique of Eisenhower's operational art. Specifically, I will review certain aspects of the Normandy and Ardennes campaigns as well as the decisions surrounding the broad front strategy and the objectives of the final drive into Germany. This effort is undertaken in the hope that a brief study of Eisenhower's campaigns in Europe will tell us something about the military tradition from which our present armed forces and operational thinking springs. Perhaps they can also teach us a few valuable lessons about those aspects of campaigning that are constant in time and required for successful warfighting. But before turning to those campaigns a few words about the intellectual forces which shaped Eisenhower's military thinking are in order.

Formative Influences

Every general regardless of his genius is a creature of his time and place in history; but he is also a product of a particular military tradition which is part of a continuum. As such, he draws from that tradition, adds to it, and passes it to the next generation of warriors. To understand how Eisenhower approached his art and what contribution he made to it that may still influence us today, we must first briefly examine the military tradition and thought he inherited and which shaped his own operational thinking.

As a graduate of West point, Eisenhower was already part of America's military elite. It was here that he was imbued with the history of the Civil War. At the time he was a student this was the last great armed conflict America had fought. He developed a

passionate interest in the Rebellion, finally retiring to a farm that borders on the Gettysburg battlefield. He, like Grant, would lead massive armies, become a master of joint operations, fight a war of annihilation with unconditional surrender as its end objective, and then go on to be President of the United States. These similarities and their general approach to war are striking and were probably not lost on Eisenhower himself. He was, I venture to say, aware of the debt he owed Grant and the other great leaders of the Civil War.

Although a generally obscure figure in the interwar period Eisenhower was exposed to the leading American military figures of his time, read military theory and history, was given assignments that challenged his skills and was felt by many of his superiors (especially George Marshall) to be an officer with outstanding potential for senior leadership.

In the twenties, Eisenhower had three important formative experiences. In the early twenties, while assigned to Panama, Eisenhower found a mentor in General Fox Connor. Connor was convinced the world would yet be again convulsed in a great global war and he intended to prepare Eisenhower for a role in it (David Eisenhower 608). It may also have been during this relatively quiet time in Panama that the future SHAPE Commander began his study of Clausewitz. That Clausewitz had an influence on Ike seems clear. David Eisenhower in his biography of his grandfather, Eisenhower at War, sketches an interesting vignette in which Ike early in September 1944 is seen "...quoting Clausewitz, lecturing his two lieutenants [Bradley and Patton] on the probable course of the battle of Germany ahead that would consist of a vast maneuver to envelope the Ruhr from the north

and south to destroy German capacity to wage war" (David Eisenhower 438). During 1928-29, while assigned to the American Battlefield Monuments Commission and under the command of General Pershing, Eisenhower toured the battlefields of WWI and traveled through Germany. He studied the tragedy of trench warfare and covered terrain for the first time that he would become intimately familiar with fifteen years later.

He would directly serve two of the great American military figures of this period: Douglas McArthur and George Marshall. Little seems to be recorded on his feelings about the "American Caesar", but his time on McArthur's staff must have given him an extraordinary education in the workings of Washington, politics and the unique relationship existing between military and civil affairs in America. This knowledge would stand him in good stead during the years ahead. His feelings about Marshall, on the other hand, were clear and very positive. He respected and revered the greatest soldier Virginia had produced since Robert E. Lee. It was a feeling that was reciprocated. Marshall made it his business to groom Ike for better things. It was also during this period that Eisenhower also developed a reputation as a planner first at the famous Louisiana exercises and then as Chief of the War Plans Division on the Army Staff (an assignment made by Marshall).

Eisenhower was as prepared, I think it is fair to say, as almost any American officer of the time could have been for the heavy responsibilities he would be asked to shoulder. His approach to conducting war --- in designing campaigns --- would be heavily influenced by the formative experiences outlined above. He believed

in making hard, decisive war directed at an enemy's will and capability to wage war. These are concepts he learned from Grant and Clausewitz. Eisenhower would also play to America's strength using her great material wealth and technology as force multipliers --- ever mindful of the political consequences of heavy casualties. He also knew from his experience as a planner that modern war was a highly complex enterprise that required detailed planning and a full understanding of how important logistics and force integration were to victory on the battlefield. He was also fully aware of how significant a factor his relationship with his civilian bosses would be. He was ready for command.

Normandy

What became known as operation OVERLORD was over a year in the planning. The initial plan was done under the auspices of the Chief of Staff to Supreme Allied Command (COSSAC). Once Eisenhower was selected as Supreme Allied Commander he began immediate refinements and sustained the political campaign that provided him the necessary resources and authority to bring OVERLORD to fruition.

Early in 1944, Eisenhower and his staff began devising a campaign conception for the European War that had D-Day simply as the beginning point and ended with "Clean out the remainder of Germany" (Dwight D. Eisenhower 228-9). Starting with that end point Eisenhower apparently moved backward through 9 separate steps that included the advance on a broadfront as well as the double envelopment of the Ruhr. In his own memoirs, Crusade in Europe, Eisenhower claims that this operational

conception "was never abandoned, even momentarily, throughout the campaign" (229). Eisenhower, through this effort to provide a general outline of operations, had established the vision and decisionmaking framework for his follow-on campaigns in Europe. With this conception in mind, the Allied Supreme Commander turned to the task of landing Allied forces in France. The host of details required to place 175,00 troops and 20,000 vehicles on the beaches of Normandy during the assault phase alone were staggering (MacDonald 279). This was further complicated by the fact that this was to be both a combined (Anglo-American forces) and joint operation (army, navy and air forces) Logistics, sequencing, deception plans were all attended to. Intelligence, in the form of ULTRA intercepts, indicated that although the Germans expected invasion at anytime most of their money remained on the Pas de Calais rather than Normandy. Despite delays caused by weather and other "frictions" of war, Allied forces successfully assaulted the coast of Normandy on 6 June 1944. It was a bold and daring move by a general often criticized as being overly cautious and without imagination.

In many ways it was detailed planning and effective campaign conceptualization that assured the success of the Allied landings in Normandy. It is remarkable, even in popular histories of D-Day, how much time is devoted to describing the preparations for this massive undertaking. The fighting itself seems almost anticlimactic by comparison.

Broadfront Strategy

The apparent and unexpected collapse of German resistance following the Allied breakout from Normandy was the catalyst for a major challenge to Eisenhower's campaign conception on the part of the British. The ensuing debate over the proper course of action for allied forces would be a test of Eisenhower's political acumen and military vision.

In the late summer of 1944, Britain's chief field commander, Montgomery, proposed that the Allies abandon the broad front approach and concentrate their forces for a single thrust pivoting northward from Paris through Belgium; capture the Ruhr; and then springing 20 divisions for a bolt over the north German plain toward Berlin. The German capital, of course being the ultimate prize. Montgomery was motivated to make this proposal based on overly optimistic intelligence assessments of the Wehrmacht's capability to resist, political considerations and personal ambition.

Intelligence reports filtering into Allied Headquarters pictured the German forces as disorganized, demoralized and defeated. A quick blow might end the war in 1944. To London such a possibility was a godsend; it would save the UK another winter of fighting and the attendant economic and manpower losses. Churchill, already distrustful of Stalin, felt the early capture of Berlin by the Western Allies would provide some leverage with Moscow in influencing events in Central and Eastern Europe. For Monty's part, such a campaign would give him and British forces a starring role in the war's denouement.

Eisenhower found this challenge to his operational concept unacceptable. His objective remained the complete destruction of the

German forces. To accomplish this required, he believed, that Allied armies proceed along a broad front, consolidate victory in France, pressure the Germans at all points, and crush the German Army in the west.

Eisenhower's estimate of enemy capabilities and intent were vastly different from Montgomery's. Depending on intuition rather than the intelligence he was receiving, Ike did not believe that the Germans were defeated. Although their retreat had been a headlong one he did not sense any panic or total organizational breakdown on the part of the Wehrmacht. His estimate of the situation was that the retreat would end at the German border, they would stand and defend the Ruhr and the Saar.

The Supreme Allied Commander also found fault with Montgomery's campaign conception. He thought it was totally heedless of logistic constraints (by 8 August 44, the Allies had advanced 260 logistical planning days in just 3 weeks --- see Green in Command Decisions). Such a plan simplified the German task of organizing a front by eliminating any uncertainty over where to defend. Eisenhower also felt that providing a secure flank for such a deep thrust would be very costly if not impossible. He had set two preconditions for the invasion of Germany itself --- the opening of Antwerp and clearing the Rhine to secure the Allied flanks. Further, he believed the war could not be won by the Allies alone; he was reluctant to forfeit Soviet support in a bid to capture Berlin. On a political note, with a presidential election campaign underway at home Eisenhower knew that a starring role for any British commander was out of the question. The very idea of Montgomery leading such an attack created dissension

among Eisenhower's senior American commanders. Bradley was particularly incensed at the British Field Marshal's proposal (Bradley 312).

Eisenhower, convinced of the military and political soundness of his campaign conception, was now left the task of turning down the British proposal for a single thrust and to do it in such a fashion that personal feelings and national pride on all sides would be spared as much as possible. He accomplished this, by and large, by consenting to operation MARKET-GARDEN --- the small solution to the single thrust approach. Even though this attempt to reach a "bridge too far" failed, it did end any further discussion of winning the war before 1945; removed any chance that Montgomery would ever be the over-all Allied forces ground commander and eliminated the single thrust approach as a viable campaign option.

Whether Eisenhower made the right decision remains a matter of some controversy. Liddel Hart believed the decision was in error (Hart 566). General James Gavin in his war memoir, On to Berlin, also stated that the single thrust, if properly implemented and supported could have ended the war earlier (Gavin 214). Even some German general officers' reminiscences suggest that Montgomery might have been right (Cooper 514). But more scholarly works indicate that Ike had it right on the logistics; the 40 division thrust was not sustainable without Antwerp as a point of supply (Green). And the German resistance at Arnhem suggests that there was still plenty of fight left in the Germans. Besides the political imperative was compelling; the command arrangements demanded by the British were untenable for the Americans. Perhaps the last word on this should be

given to one of Eisenhower's most persistent and influential British critics, Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff. When he stood with Eisenhower on the banks of the Rhine watching British forces of the 21st Army Group as they crossed the river, Alan Brooke turned to him and said: "Thank God, Ike, you stuck by your plan. You were completely right and I am sorry if my fear of dispersed effort added to your burdens" (qtd in David Eisenhower 372).

Ardennes

One direct result of the broad front approach was the initial success of the German counteroffensive in the Ardennes during the winter of 1944-45. Eisenhower, as he built up forces for the invasion of Germany and still advancing on a broad front, consciously left the Ardennes sector thinly manned by units in the process of refitting. He was taking a calculated risk that the Wehrmacht would not attack again through this heavily wooded area, and that if they did he could successfully contain them. He was wrong on the first point and correct on the second. But before the Battle of the Bulge was over Ike would have to contain a political firestorm over command relationships that was as difficult as any of the desperate fighting around Bastogne. In The Bitter Woods, John Eisenhower refers to this as the test that shook the Allied coalition.

The failure of intelligence to accurately assess the scope and intent of the German buildup in the Ardennes as well as bad weather allowed the Germans the advantage of surprise when their Panzer divisions struck the thin and considerably lighter armed American line

of forces. Initially the German advance made great strides; but hampered by logistics problems of their own, the channelized nature of the Ardennes road network, and the stiff, dogged resistance of the American GI gradually sapped the strength of the German attackers.

Once Allied forces had contained the German thrust, Eisenhower moved to cutoff German forces in the resulting salient by cutting the bulge in two at its base with forces attacking from both the north and south of the salient and meeting somewhere in the middle. To do this in a coordinated fashion he had to transfer command of the 1st and 9th American Armies from Bradley to Montgomery. Bradley was beside himself with this state of affairs even though military logic dictated no other possible alternative arrangement. In the event, Montgomery used this situation to criticize Bradley's performance as well as Eisenhower's operational concept again and to make one more bid to be named over-all ground commander. Bradley talked openly of resigning. Eisenhower made it clear that his patience with Field Marshal Montgomery had run out. Montgomery apologized for his actions in the nick of time only to stir up trouble again during an ill-considered press conference in which he took more credit for the victory than he deserved. This whole controversy underscores how difficult command of coalition forces can be even when the forces involved are close cultural cousins. Reconciling different military traditions can be tricky business.

The military crisis and the command crisis created by the Battle of the Bulge had passed as the year 1945 began. The bulk of German forces had, however, escaped to fight another day. Eisenhower made preparations for the invasion of Germany.

The Final Push

In his final campaign of the war Eisenhower has been more criticized for the political rather than the military qualities of his decisions. In particular, his apparent failure to drive on Berlin and to come to the aid of Czech partisans in Prague rather than letting these capitals fall into Soviet hands have been the subject of considerable debate. These debates, however, have a highly ex post facto flavor about them; most seem designed to score ideological points rather than to arrive at any historical truths. Past wars have a nasty habit of being constantly reinterpreted in the light of current events.

Eisenhower made these decisions within the framework of his original operational design as well as the political and military constraints that faced him on the ground in Europe during the Spring of 1945. His assigned mission was to drive into the heart of Germany and destroy that nation's ability to wage war. Eisenhower operationally interpreted this to mean the "destruction of the enemy forces which meant hunting down and destroying the German Army where it stood rather than exploiting the freedom of action to seize fixed objectives " (qtd in David Eisenhower 447). Ike believed that the center of gravity was the German Army and the industrial capability (primarily centered in the Ruhr) which sustained it, and not political objectives like Berlin.

From both military and political viewpoints the Supreme Allied Commander faced a series of constraints. He was facing a freeze on manpower. The British had no more to give; the French remained

marginal players; and the US was beginning to build-up for the anticipated invasion of Japan. To take Berlin would cost 100,000 Allied casualties it was estimated. This seemed a high price to pay for an objective that lay within the agreed upon Soviet zone of occupation and which was soon to come under attack by Zhukov's massive forces (Soviet casualties were 305,000 from 16 April to 8 May) (Zhukov 288). Eisenhower was still concerned about the possible need to fight and capture a southern German redoubt where intelligence reports indicated fanatical Nazi forces were preparing for a last ditch stand. Additionally, He faced another strain on his resources --- a shattered Europe lay behind and around him with tens of millions of POWs and refugees that he was now responsible for. He was also uncertain Soviet intentions. If Allied forces moved against significant objectives inside areas meant for their occupation would they fire on his forces once contact was made? How was contact to be coordinated so that such incidents might be avoided? Would precipitous moves in Czechoslovakia be matched by similar moves by the Soviets toward the Danish Peninsula ? Perhaps more bedeviling were the questions on how the surrender of German armies was to be negotiated. These questions involved such subjects as who had authority to negotiate for Germany, given the collapse of its government; could armies fleeing the Soviets in the East surrender to the Allies in the West, etc. Eisenhower received little useful guidance from Washington. Roosevelt, obviously ill, left things increasingly in the hands of others. At one point Eisenhower found himself negotiating directly with the Kremlin. He chose to make a peace that conserved Allied lives, recognized Soviet strength and interests, and honored agreements the wartime allies had

arrived at for arranging matters in the post-war world. Generals sometimes find themselves forced to play the role of statesman.

Lessons to be Learned

Eisenhower's wartime experiences in Europe clearly underscore the importance of certain fundamental aspects of military campaigning, they include:

-- Campaign conception and planning: Eisenhower said it best when he noted that plans are nothing, but planning is everything. Mastery of the nuts and bolts of campaigning --- as well as the development of clearly stated objectives that are apportioned to adequate means to achieve them --- are the sine qua nons for conducting effective campaigns. A high degree of skill in these matters made the Normandy landings possible and then assured that Allied forces did not over extend themselves in the subsequent fighting. It is also necessary for establishing control over the tempo of combat.

-- Leadership: Leadership, that undefinable, non-quantifiable, uniquely human element that makes the military profession more art than science (and more akin to politics than professional soldiers like to admit), remains --- despite the size and complexity of machine age armies --- a constant element in successful campaigning. The strength of a single personality still makes a difference whether it be on the battlefield or in the briefing room. Leadership, tailored to the crisis at hand, is often the margin of difference between

victory and catastrophe.

-- Politics count: Meeting the requirements of politics is inescapable in conducting successful military operations. This is especially true in the conduct of coalition warfare. There were innumerable times when Eisenhower could have seriously undermined the war effort --- perhaps mortally so --- if he had not been so adroit in dealing with the Allied political leaders and their military commanders.

Eisenhower constantly had to maintain a balance between military requirements and meeting the needs and soothing the sensitivities of his political bosses. Clausewitz had it right, war is simply another segment on the continuum of political activity. Successful generals are successful politicians.

-- Military tradition: It is essential to fully understand those intellectual and historical forces that shape the military professional. They unconsciously drive the soldier to make the decisions he does. Such knowledge allows him to more fully draw on that tradition for strength and guidance as well as to modify it when it no longer is adequate or appropriate to the situation.

-- War termination criteria: The fruits of victory can quickly evaporate if they are not exploited for some clearly attainable end. Ambiguous war termination criteria can result in needless bloodshed and meaningless sacrifice. Eisenhower had difficulty in interpreting what the "unconditional" surrender of Germany meant and how such a condition was to be coordinated with the Soviets. It also

unnecessarily complicated the surrender of Wehrmacht field armies. Clear, unambiguous, achievable war termination criteria are a critical aspect to campaigning.

-- Intelligence: Knowing the enemy's capabilities, intentions and force dispositions significantly simplifies the tasks of operational planning and campaign execution. ULTRA, because it often accurately provided this kind of information and because Eisenhower accepted its usefulness at face value, made a significant contribution to the Allied victory in Europe. On the other hand, faulty intelligence can disrupt the best laid plans. Over optimistic intelligence reports on the "collapse" of German forces in the Autumn of 1944, total failure in the Ardennes surprise as well as exaggerated reports about a so-called German redoubt all complicated Eisenhower's task. He was, however, a realistic user of intelligence. He knew its limitations, often reserved judgment based on his own intuition and rarely gambled large stakes on the basis of intelligence reports alone. Good intelligence is a gift from the gods and should never be taken for granted.

These are lessons I am sure that General Schwarzkopf is quite familiar with. They are lessons each military leader must come to grips with in this age. The successful campaign leader must live in many worlds, to simply be a soldier is not enough.

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